

Hot spot

Plan to rid Tonawanda of N-waste stirs concern

By DAN HERBECK
News Staff Reporter

Since World War II, thousands of tons of radioactive waste from construction of the first atomic bomb have been stored in a Town of Tonawanda dump site, dangerously close to homes, parks, schools and businesses.

Within the next two weeks, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is scheduled to begin a \$38 million cleanup to remove the waste dumped along River Road after the Manhattan Project.

For many town residents and officials, it's a reason to rejoice. They say the project will make the town a safer place to live and will open up hundreds of acres of Niagara River waterfront for new development.

The radioactive waste has long been a touchy issue in a town that is home to 84,000 residents, 5,000 businesses, dozens of parks and playgrounds and 23 public and private schools.

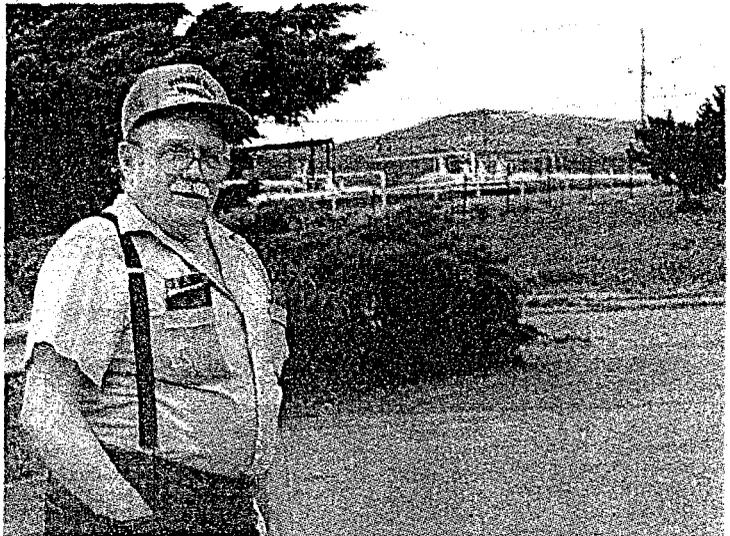
"As a person who has lived in this town since 1954, I think this is great news — finally getting this nuclear waste out of our community. . . . It's a relief," said Mary Rita Miller, president of the town's Chamber of Commerce.

But an environmental group has filed a federal lawsuit, raising questions about the safety of the endeavor.

The group called FACTS, or For a Clean Tonawanda Site, wants a judge to halt the cleanup until more research can be done.

Donald Finch, an officer of the group, said the existing plan will not do a thorough

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Donald Finch, of FACTS (For A Clean Tonawanda Site)

Countdown to cleanup

The history:

Refineries used in the Manhattan Project to develop the atomic bomb during World War II contaminated land in the Town of Tonawanda with thousands of tons of low-level radioactive waste. Much of the site has been vacant ever since.

The controversy:

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hopes to begin a \$38 million cleanup project soon but an environmental group wants to halt the work until members are sure it will be done safely. Government officials call the lawsuit frivolous.

The cleanup:

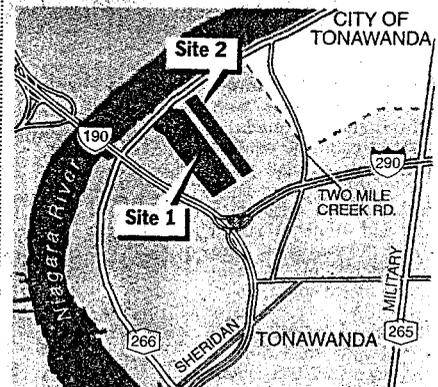
Contaminated matter will be put into dumpster-sized containers that will be sealed and eventually shipped to sites in the West.

The future:

Town of Tonawanda officials hope to develop the town's waterfront, both for business and residential uses.



"This is a huge development for our town. It's a great impediment to developing our waterfront, with a nuclear waste site sitting there."
Tonawanda Supervisor Carl J. Calabrese



Waste: Opponents contend their concern is for future

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enough job of removing all traces of radioactivity from the site.

"We're in favor of the clean-up," Finch said this week. "We just want it to be done the right way."

"I know that when the word of our lawsuit gets around, some will say, 'These people are crazy; they're standing in the way of progress.' All we want is for every bit of contamination to be removed. We're concerned about people who live in Tonawanda now and for future generations, even thousands of years from now."

Government officials call the lawsuit frivolous and say the Corps of Engineers is taking the highest precautions. So far, U.S. District Judge John T. Elfvin seems to agree. Earlier this month, he refused to grant a temporary restraining order that would have held up the project.

"They have been studying the safety factors for years and years," Mrs. Miller said. "We're finally getting this waste removed. We shouldn't delay this any longer."

"This is a huge development for our town," added Town of Tonawanda Supervisor Carl J. Calabrese. "It's a great impediment to developing our waterfront with a nuclear waste site sitting there."

The material is to be moved from two sites, known as Ashland 1 and Ashland 2, located off River Road, east of the South Grand Island Bridge and west of Two Mile Creek Road.

Calabrese said it is an odd feeling knowing that hundreds of Tonawanda workers played a key role in building the A-bomb, the worst killing machine known to man.

On one hand, the bomb created death, destruction and all kinds of environmental problems, Calabrese said.

"But on the other hand, it probably saved millions of lives by ending World War II earlier, and I think our town can be proud of its role in that," the supervisor said.

Tonawanda officials do not claim that the dumping was improper at the time.

"They followed the regulations that were in effect in those days, but since then, standards have changed," Calabrese said. "Today, you would never have radioactive waste dumped in an area that is

so heavily populated, gets so much rain and is so close to a fresh water supply."

After decades of debate and study, the federal government agreed in August 1996 that it would remove the waste from Tonawanda.

At that time, town officials said they hoped the cleanup eventually would clear the way for the development of 265 homes and 6,800 jobs in the waterfront area. The homes would be developed, not on the dump site itself, but on a nearby bluff overlooking Isle View Park. The town hopes to develop businesses on the dump site.

"We still see those as realistic goals," Calabrese said.

Finch said his concern is that "power brokers, developers and business people" are driving the government to push the cleanup too fast.

He said his group wants more research done to guarantee the waste-removal job will be thorough enough to protect people who live and work in the area. The organization said the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, rather than the Corps of Engineers, should oversee the cleanup.

Supporters say more than enough research already has been done to guarantee its safety.

"Tonawanda residents shouldn't be scared of this project," Calabrese said. "They should be very happy to wave goodbye to radioactive waste that has been sitting here since World War II."

Richard Tobe, Erie County commissioner of environment and planning, agreed.

"It's time to get this waste out of the Town of Tonawanda and off our waterfront," he said. "The work that is about to commence is the culmination of 10 years of very hard work and study. This is a tremendous success story — the first time since World War II that radioactive waste is leaving Western New York instead of coming in."

"The highest safety standards used anywhere in the country are being used in this project. We've listened and tried to address the concerns of the (opposition group) over the past few years."

The government will follow all appropriate safety rules and regulations, said Michelle F. Barczak, assistant district counsel for the Corps of Engineers.

"Right now, the only work that has been done so far is preparato-

Tonawanda and the A-bomb — A Timeline

1942-48 — As part of the Manhattan Project, development of the first atom bomb, uranium ore is processed at the Linde Air Products plant. Eight thousand tons of low-level radioactive waste is dumped in the Town of Tonawanda.

Aug. 6, 1945 — First atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima, Japan, killing 200,000 people and hastening the end of World War II.

1960 — Radioactive dump site, off River Road near South Grand Island Bridge, is sold by federal government to Ashland Oil.

1974 — Ashland transports hundreds of truckloads of radioactive soil from its sites to the nearby Seaway landfill, overlooking the Youngman Expressway.

Early 1989 — Local residents are outraged over a federal plan to bring more radioactive waste from a site near Albany for storage at Tonawanda site.

Late 1988 — The Coalition Against Nuclear Materials in Tonawanda is organized to fight for removal of wastes from the town.

November 1993 — The U.S. Department of Energy announces plan to keep the waste in Tonawanda, saying it presents no public health danger if stored properly.

August 1996 — In a surprising reversal, Energy Department decides to remove all the radioactive waste from the River Road site to a location outside Western New York.

December 1997 — Radioactive soil is removed from the former Linde plant, now known as Praxair, near Sheridan Park.

April 27, 1998 — U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announces plan to begin excavation in June, and move waste by train to a location in one of the western states. Plan of action for radioactive material at Seaway site is yet to be determined.

June 2, 1998 — The environmental group For A Clean Tonawanda Site files federal lawsuit asking to halt cleanup until more questions about safety can be answered.

ry work — preparing a temporary holding area for the material, putting more gravel on a road that will be used," Ms. Barczak said. "The actual excavation work will probably begin in the next week or two."

Contamination on the River Road property is low-level radiation, but it is still a health hazard to residents of Tonawanda, said Tobe, who is also the chairman of the Coalition Against Nuclear Materials in Tonawanda.

"The waste never should have been dumped there," he said. "Remember, the Great Lakes hold one-fifth of the world's fresh water, and to my knowledge, this is the only waterfront site off any of the Great Lakes where radioactive materials were dumped."

Tobe said Rep. John J. LaFalce, D-Town of Tonawanda, was the key player in obtaining federal funding for the cleanup.

In the cleanup, which will take two construction seasons, contaminated matter will be put into dumpster-sized containers, Ms. Barczak said. They will be sealed and moved to a loading station near the railroad tracks behind Fire Tower Industrial Park.

"From there, the waste will be shipped in railroad cars to a waste facility in the West," she said.

In addition to the River Road cleanup, work has been going on at the former Linde plant — now known as Praxair — for the past two years. And research is under way on what to do with a smaller amount of radioactive waste buried at the Seaway landfill between the

two Ashland sites.

The opposition group says in court papers that the plan does not go far enough.

"Their cleanup plan will make the land ready for industrial use, but we think they should go a step further and make it ready for all uses, including residential," Finch said. "We think the project should be held to the highest standard."

The coalition against nuclear materials has an environmental consultant who has been closely inspecting the federal cleanup plan and considers it to be a good plan, Tobe said.

Calabrese said the River Road property will be used for business development. Plans call for nearby properties to be used for residential development.

"For years," Calabrese said, "developers have been telling us you can't get anything going in that area as long as you have a nuclear waste dump in the neighborhood."

Calabrese said he considers the opposition group's lawsuit to be "an obstructionist move. It makes me think these people are more interested in making a point than they are in cleaning up the environment."

"Officials of this town fought for years just to get the federal government to accept responsibility for this waste. Look, there is only a certain amount of money available for this kind of cleanup," the supervisor said, "and for us to tell the federal government we want to delay further would be a tragic mistake."